

Prabowo and the Dangerous Crossroad for Indonesia - China Bilateral Relations

by: *Dinna Prapto Raharja, Ph.D. and Joan Anindya Wardhani*



Source: Cabinet Secretariat of The Republic of Indonesia

The South China Sea is geopolitically important not just for China but also for the neighboring countries, including Indonesia. How Indonesia manages the issue matters to the region's political security, which also affects the interdependent economic relations of countries in the region. Indonesia's response is critical as it is not only relaying information about the bilateral Indonesia-China relations but also the ASEAN-China relations.

Indonesia's newly inaugurated 8th President, Prabowo Subianto, recently returned from his first trip abroad. He chose to visit these countries in the following order: China¹, the United States, Peru (for the APEC meeting), Brazil (for the G20 meeting), the United Kingdom, and the United Arab Emirates. President

¹ Indonesia Defense Ministry. April 3, 2024. "Tutup Lawatan ke China, Menhan Prabowo Melakukan Kunjungan Kerja Kepada Menhan China", see <https://www.kemhan.go.id/2024/04/03/tutup-lawatan-ke-china-menhan-prabowo-melakukan-kunjungan-kerja-kepada-menhan-china.html>

Prabowo Subianto's cross-continental visits spanned 16 days, starting from November 8 to November 23, 2024.²

These state visits mark a departure from the usual practices of previous Indonesian presidents, who usually prioritize visits to neighboring countries or nations deemed crucial to Indonesia's immediate strategic interests. For example, President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) visited Malaysia, Brunei, and the Philippines, while also meeting with Chinese leaders as part of the APEC Summit agenda.³ President Megawati Sukarnoputri visited all member states of ASEAN a month later and visited the United States following the 9/11 tragedy of 2001. President Abdurrahman Wahid visited ASEAN, Japan, the US, Qatar, Kuwait, and Jordan and only a month afterward made a separate visit to China. So, why did Prabowo choose China as his first destination? Moreover, when he was first announced as the winner of the February 2024 election, he also came to China to meet with Xi Jinping.

How does Prabowo see China in his foreign policy approach?

² Fika Nurul Ulya. November 8, 2024. Kompas. "Hari Ini, Prabowo Mulai Lawatan Luar Negeri pertamanya sebagai Presiden", see <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2024/11/08/08020551/hari-ini-prabowo-mulai-lawatan-luar-negeri-pertamanya-sebagai-presiden?page=all>

³ Dinna on Diplomacy Youtube. November 19, 2024. "Prabowo Tinggalin ASEAN Demi China?", see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K-iletO64d0>

Prabowo's style of governance

Prabowo Subianto has made multiple attempts to secure the presidency, running in 2009, 2014, and 2019. Many believed his political career was over, assuming he had exhausted both resources and energy. However, President Joko Widodo's pragmatic approach to consolidating power in the latter part of his administration brought Prabowo back into the spotlight. In 2019, Jokowi appointed him as Minister of Defense, a position that enabled Prabowo to reframe his image as a leader with an international focus.

Prabowo's governance style is marked by a deliberate balance between military assertiveness and diplomatic engagement. His vision for Indonesia prioritizes bolstering defense capabilities while adhering to a non-aligned and cooperative foreign policy. During his 2023 presidential campaign, he pledged to modernize Indonesia's military by investing in advanced technology, strengthening cybersecurity, and developing a self-reliant defense industry. Simultaneously, he maintained a neutral stance in the U.S.-China rivalry, emphasizing Indonesia's commitment to non-alignment and regional cooperation.

While this position aligns with Indonesia's traditional foreign policy approach, what sets Prabowo's leadership apart is the strong emphasis on establishing a robust domestic defense industry. He has

frequently asserted in domestic speeches that Indonesia cannot emerge as a regional power without a formidable military. This focus on defense not only reinforces sovereignty but also signals his vision of Indonesia as a self-reliant and influential force in the region.

On the other hand, Prabowo is often seen as a nationalist paternalistic leader, portraying himself as a unifier of the nation. He emphasizes loyalty and centralized authority to demonstrate strength and stability. The first action he took after appointing 136 people as his aides, ranging from ministers, deputy ministers, and heads of other agencies, was to conduct a military-style retreat at the Military Academy (Akmil) complex in Magelang, Central Java. The four-day retreat, which took place from October 24 to October 27, 2024, was entirely funded by Prabowo himself, demonstrating his personal commitment to this unconventional team-building approach.



Source: Tribun News Indonesia

Prabowo introduced "The Military Way" as a framework for promoting discipline and loyalty to both the nation and its people. During the retreat, cabinet members participated in various activities including military-style drills, marching exercises, and intensive training sessions. The cabinet members dressed in camouflage uniforms, engaged in morning drills, and participated in team-building exercises designed to foster unity and cooperation.

His paternalistic leadership style is reinforced by populist programs, including free meals for students, initiatives to achieve self-sufficiency in food, energy, and water, as well as support for creative industries and the development of green and blue economies. The agenda also prioritizes job creation, advancing downstream industrialization, implementing political, legal, and bureaucratic reforms, and intensifying efforts to combat corruption and narcotics.⁴

On foreign policy, so far Prabowo keeps the agenda of foreign policy to his closest circle, and this closest circle filters inputs coming from other sources, including from the diplomats in the Foreign Ministry.

⁴ Cabinet Secretariat of The Republic of Indonesia. October 20, 2024. "Presiden Prabowo Subianto Umumkan Susunan Kabinet Merah Putih di Istana Merdeka, Jakarta", see <https://www.kemhan.go.id/2024/04/03/tutup-la-watan-ke-china-menhan-prabowo-melakukan-kunjungan-kerja-kepada-menhan-china.html>

Foreign Minister Sugiyono, the deputy chairperson of the Gerindra Party was Prabowo's personal assistant.⁵ Secretary of the Cabinet, Teddy, who was previously Prabowo's aide, is now the one responsible for filtering all meetings and information to Prabowo, including handling the protocol details for his foreign policy meetings.⁶ For the first time in the foreign ministry's history, there are now three vice ministers Anis Matta, Arrmanatha Nasir, and Arif Havas. However, how these individuals channel information and discuss substantive issues with President Prabowo depends on the closest circle mentioned above.

Prabowo's approach to China

Prabowo's paternalistic leadership style and the need to sustain populist programs that align with this approach appear to influence his foreign policy priorities, creating a potential bias. His visit to China, for instance, seems to place greater emphasis on advancing his domestic populist agenda, potentially at the expense of a careful and comprehensive assessment

of China's broader strategic intentions. This approach raises questions about the balance between pursuing domestic goals and maintaining a cautious, well-informed stance in international relations, particularly when engaging with a global power like China.

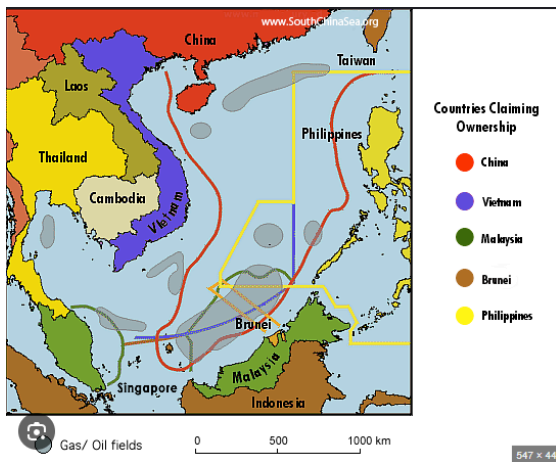
China was excited to welcome Prabowo. Even before he was inaugurated, Xi Jinping invited him to meet in Beijing and Prabowo responded right away. When Prabowo was inaugurated, China was the first country to visit. Prabowo and Xi produced a joint statement where it shows how Prabowo focuses on obtaining financing from China for his domestic agendas: free meals, intensive high-level military-to-military exchanges, joint military exercises on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, mineral cooperation, green development, and energy transition. China on the other hand locked in Indonesia's commitment to frequent communication to provide strategic guidance for deepening the Indonesia-China partnership. There was term "head-of-state diplomacy" was inserted in the joint statement to underline the personal dialog between the two countries.

However, there was a fallout on Prabowo's agreement to include several paragraphs on maritime cooperation. It says in the document "The two sides reached an important common understanding on joint development in areas of overlapping

⁵ Daniel Peterson. October 28, 2024. "A Prabowo and Sugiono foreign policy: substantive or performative change?". Indonesia at Melbourne. See <https://indonesiaatmelbourne.unimelb.edu.au/a-prabowo-and-sugiono-foreign-policy-substantive-or-performative-change/>

⁶ Antara News. October 20, 2024. "Profil Teddy Indra Wijaya Sekretaris Kabinet era Prabowo". See https://www.antaranews.com/berita/4410781/profil-teddy-indra-wijaya-sekretaris-kabinet-era-prabowo#google_vignette

claims and agreed to establish an Inter-Governmental Joint Steering Committee to explore and advance relevant cooperation..”. This phrase sparked polemic because of the “overlapping claims” piece. Experts, including the writer (Dinna) who spoke on various media channels, on why the taboo words get into the statement. The fact that a joint steering committee was formed may also imply that Indonesia bypassed the ASEAN mechanism to deal with the overlapping claims of ASEAN member states. This is because Indonesia by history never had any territorial disputes with China on the seas. For years Indonesia chose to shake off China’s nine and then ten dash-line claims on the South China Sea because Indonesia by law is among the legal authority over the areas that China claimed as its area.



Source: <https://www.southchinasea.org/>

Another notable point was the promise by Indonesia and China to "jointly conduct closer major-country coordination to tackle

global challenges." A positive aspect of this statement is the shared commitment to developing a UN-centered international system and order based on international law, along with the norms and principles outlined in the UN Charter. Additionally, the statement emphasized the need to build an open world economy, foster a non-discriminatory trade and investment environment, reject the decoupling of supply chains, unilateralism, and protectionism, and safeguard the interests of developing WTO members.

However, the section promoting coordination among Global South countries raises some concerns. The two nations pledged to enhance coordination and cooperation within frameworks such as the UN, APEC, G20, and BRICS to strengthen solidarity among Global South countries. This is unprecedented because China is no longer classified as a developing country. Furthermore, on issues like technology, innovation, and conflict resolution, Indonesia’s position often diverges significantly from China’s.

It will likely be challenging for Prabowo to maintain a balanced and autonomous stance from China. Fortunately, the joint statement also reaffirms a commitment to promoting an equitable and orderly multipolar world and fostering universally beneficial and inclusive economic globalization. This aligns with Indonesia’s aspiration to contribute to global peace. Additionally, China pledged to support

Indonesia's leadership role within ASEAN.

The dangerous crossroads

Prabowo assumes office at a precarious time in international politics. Many are at stake given the rise of Donald Trump in the United States, the ongoing war in Ukraine, the Gaza crisis, upheavals in Middle Eastern politics driven by Iran's nuclear ambitions, the Myanmar uncertainty, the rise of far-right parties in Europe, and the formation of BRICS. Some may argue that these events are part of a broader process to establish new equilibriums. However, what remains unspoken is the toll this process takes: losses for businesses, shrinking civic space, and severe social impacts on nations whose voices remain overshadowed by major powers.

China faces mounting scrutiny on the global stage. In Europe, it is perceived as a security threat due to its export of military technology to Russia and its lack of action regarding North Korea, which allegedly supplies soldiers to Russia. The South China Sea issue has further bolstered views of China's aggressive tendencies. Meanwhile, the United States accuses China of accumulating wealth through unjust means, and Europe perceives China's actions as undermining the European Union's unity.

Against this backdrop, Prabowo's decision to strengthen ties with China is

undoubtedly bold. However, judging by Indonesia's established foreign policy identity, this move is not necessarily reckless. In these fast-changing dynamics, Indonesia must remain agile and prepared to adjust its course as needed. One thing that should change, however, is Prabowo's style in moving along the process of global change. He must engage a broader circle of experts, including scholars and practitioners from all walks of life. He must strengthen the capacity of Indonesia's Foreign Ministry instead of bypassing it. (*)

References

Antara News. October 20, 2024. "Profil Teddy Indra Wijaya Sekretaris Kabinet era Prabowo". See https://www.antaraneews.com/berita/4410781/profil-teddy-indra-wijaya-sekretaris-kabinet-era-prabowo#google_vignette

Cabinet Secretariat of The Republic of Indonesia. October 20, 2024. "Presiden Prabowo Subianto Umumkan Susunan Kabinet Merah Putih di Istana Merdeka, Jakarta", see <https://www.kemhan.go.id/2024/04/03/tutup-lawatan-ke-china-menhan-prabowo-melakukan-kunjungan-kerja-kepada-menhan-china.html>

Dinna on Diplomacy Youtube. November 19, 2024. "Prabowo Tinggalin ASEAN Demi China?", see

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K-iletO64do>

Indonesia Defense Ministry. April 3, 2024. "Tutup Lawatan ke China, Menhan Prabowo Melakukan Kunjungan Kerja Kepada Menhan China", see <https://www.kemhan.go.id/2024/04/03/tutup-lawatan-ke-china-menhan-prabowo-melakukan-kunjungan-kerja-kepada-menhan-china.html>

Peterson, Daniel. October 28, 2024. "A Prabowo and Sugiono foreign policy: substantive or performative

change?". Indonesia at Melbourne. See

<https://indonesiaatmelbourne.unimelb.edu.au/a-prabowo-and-sugiono-foreign-policy-substantive-or-performative-change/>

Ulya, Fika Nurul. November 8, 2024. Kompas. "Hari Ini, Prabowo Mulai Lawatan Luar Negeri Pertamanya sebagai Presiden", see <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2024/11/08/08020551/hari-ini-prabowo-mulai-lawatan-luar-negeri-pertamanya-sebagai-presiden?page=all>.